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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Thuermer, G. (2019). Challenges of Online Participation: Digital Inequality in Party-Internal Processes. In *Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2019 "Challenges of Digital Inequality - Digital Education, Digital Work, Digital Life"* (pp. 1-10). Berlin <https://doi.org/10.34669/wi.cp/2.2>

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CHALLENGES OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION: DIGITAL INEQUALITY IN PARTY-INTERNAL PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

Parties adopt online participation methods in the hope of engaging a wider group of participants. However, literature on the digital divide suggests that this is unlikely to happen, as online participation remains dependent on the same factors as offline participation: income, class, education. Based on a mixed methods study of members of the Green Party Germany, this paper discusses the expected and actual effects of online participation tools on the participation of party members. Expectations are that these tools will benefit nearly everyone, but in practice, the goal to engage inactive members is only partially achieved: Younger members and those with lower educational attainments are mobilised, but women are not. These effects differ depending on the type of technology. I argue that this is an expression of the prevailing digital divide, which needs to consider not only a socio-demographic divisions, but also the multifaceted effects of different technologies.

KEYWORDS

Online participation; party-internal participation, digital divide, digital inequality, mobilisation, reinforcement.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore the effect of two online participation tools (OPTs) in the Green Party Germany on the participation behavior of the party members. While the use of technology by political parties has been widely researched, especially with regards to communication to and with the general public (Gibson and Ward, 1998; Graham et al., 2014), the use of technology in party-internal processes is not yet well explored (Bieber, 2014), and the effects of internal tools are virtually unknown. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap, and provide pointers to a future research agenda on party-internal online participation, by answering the research questions:

1. What are the expected effects of OPTs, and to which degree do they guide decisions about their implementation?
2. What are the actual effects, and how do they differ from expectations, and between groups and tools?

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 DIGITAL DIVIDE & ONLINE PARTICIPATION

The internet has been hailed as a force for democratization, but little of what it seemed to promise has materialized. One of the major challenge of online participation, be it within parties or society, is the digital divide, which was discussed ever since the internet became a regularly used tool. Its perception has shifted from a first level ‘access divide’, looking at who does or does not have access to the internet, to a skill or age divide (Hague and Loader, 1999), famously framed in the divide between digital natives and immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Most recently, the digital inequality perspective argues that offline inequalities are continued online (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001), and that individuals’ socio-demographic status affects the degree to which they can benefit from using the web (Hargittai, 2008). Access to, use of, and benefits derived

from use of the internet are not distributed equally in society, and inequalities that exist offline are reproduced online (Halford and Savage, 2010).

The participation divide, whereby influence on political decisions is “systematically biased in favor of more privileged citizens – those with higher incomes, greater wealth, and better education” (Lijphart, 1997) – is perpetuated or even exacerbated online. Not only are these privileged citizens more likely to participate politically in general, but they are also more likely to be online (Emmer et al., 2011; Loader and Mercea, 2011). In consequence, a selective group comprised of young, wealthy, highly educated, men, is the main beneficiary of online political participation opportunities.

In the context of online participation, the question of digital inequality is highly relevant. Arguably, if the internet is not equal, online participation cannot be equal either. This is especially problematic in democratic contexts, where equal opportunity to participate in decision-making processes is important to maintain the legitimacy of decisions (Michels and De Graaf, 2010). Adopting OPTs is therefore a particular challenge for parties such as the Green Party Germany, who intend to use online processes to foster equal participation (Kellner, 2015). If offline differences, such as age, education, or gender indeed affect whether party members would use OPTs, then how can these tools increase inclusion?

Two concepts are frequently used to assess the effects of online platforms: Mobilisation and reinforcement. The mobilisation theory poses that with new opportunities to participate online, more, and more diverse, participants will engage in the political process (Ward et al., 2002). The reinforcement theory on the other hand suggests that, as more online participation opportunities become available, these are being picked up by those who are already active, giving them an additional advantage (Gibson et al., 2017). Reinforcement is a much more common result of tool introductions than mobilisation (Gerl et al.,

2018; Kersting, 2014). However, there is also evidence of mobilisation happening over time, once tools are established (Kerr and Waddington, 2014).

2.2 GREEN PARTY GERMANY

The Green Party Germany was founded in 1980, out of the women's, environmental, and peace movements (Frankland, 2008). It was developed bottom-up, with local branches being created first, and a national umbrella organisation following later (Switek, 2012). Due to these roots, the party has a tradition of grass-roots participation, and uses bottom-up processes. The party leadership sets the agenda, but does not make policy decisions. A national delegate assembly, comprising over 800 delegates from 416 local chapters, is the main decision-making body (*Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen*, 2015).

Since the party was founded and its participation processes developed well before the rise of the web, all processes are offline by default (Thürmer et al., 2016). The party has strong measures to ensure their grass-roots ideal is followed, for example through limitations on party leaders holding mandates or positions in government. One aspect that is particularly important to the party is gender balance – owing to their roots in women's movements. This is enshrined in the women's statute, which includes regulations like a gender quota for all elections, where half of all positions must be filled with women. It also includes procedural rules, such as gendered speaker lists at all assemblies, so that women and men have equal opportunity and time to speak in debates, as well as women-only votes and committees. All of these influence both the lived experience of balanced participation in the party, and how OPTs are perceived. The parties' commitment to participation and equality make it an ideal case to study the effects of OPTs; if OPTs can be successful anywhere, it should be here.

At the time of the data collection for this project, the party had just grown to 70,000 members, the

highest count in their history. The party leadership wanted to engage the members and maintain the grass-roots participation ideal by using online technology (Bundesvorstand Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen, 2016). They introduced two OPTs to engage more members, and especially those who struggle to do so through formal routes:

- *Antragsgrün*, an online platform where members can publish, comment on, support and submit proposals for assemblies. The platform was introduced in 2014, and consistently developed, with the addition of a verification process for supporters added in 2017, and tracking for the status of proposals in 2018.
- *Mitgliederbegehren (Begehren)*, a petition system through which members can collectively make a demand from the executive board. It is based on the same, custom-built online system as *Antragsgrün*. The board does not have to act on these petitions, but must justify their decision. The tool was introduced in 2018.

3 METHODOLOGY

A panel survey among a stratified sample of 4,236 party members was conducted, with the first wave in November 2017, and the second in July 2018. To prevent a bias towards members who are already engaged online, the sample included 500 members who did not communicate with the party by email, and an equivalent number of members who did. All participants had the option to respond either online or on paper. The first survey received 572 responses, with a response rate of 14%, and the second 457 responses, or 11%. Both are comparable to similar studies (cf. Gerl et al., 2018).

The survey included questions around members' views on and use of the OPTs, their expectations of those tools, views on participation in general, and a set of demographic questions. For this paper, two sets of questions are relevant:

1. *How do you think more opportunities to participate online are going to influence the participation of these groups?*

Groups were arranged in complementary pairs (see Figure 1), and measured on a five-point Likert scale, from ‘(1) Participation becomes harder’ to ‘(5) Participation becomes easier’. The pairs, based on the first panel surveys, are summarised (see Figure 1 below) and compared to assess members’ expectations. All statements were also tested for correlations between respondents’ own situation and their assumptions about groups that they would or would not be considered to belong to, to see whether, for example, respondents’ age influenced their assumptions about the effect of online participation on younger or older members. However, none of these resulted in significant correlations.

2. *How do you think the [Antragsgrün/Begehren] has affected your own participation?*

Possible responses included ‘I participated more / the same / less / differently’. Binary logistic regression models were developed based on the second survey, with ‘I participated more’ as the dependent variable, allowing conclusions over the factors that contributed to increased participation.

A factor score was generated to gauge participants’ activity within the party, based on the frequency and channels (e.g. email, meetings) used. This allows to distinguish between mobilisation, when groups become active without having been so before, and reinforcement, when groups increase their participation although they have already been more active than others.

In addition to the surveys, 38 interviews were conducted with members and stakeholders of the party who were involved in the discussion or implementation of OPTs, between November 2016 and March 2018. These were transcribed and coded thematically, to understand the assumptions, expectations, and views on the OPTs. In this paper, the interviews are used to contextualise survey findings; a detailed analysis of the interviews is available in Thuermer et al., 2018.

4 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Previous, qualitative work based on interviews and observations has shown that party members expect these new OPTs to empower members who are currently excluded from participation (Thuermer et al., 2018). However, while their general assumption is that online participation opportunities will mainly be beneficial for ‘others’, whom they believed to be disadvantaged through current processes. They hardly reflected on the potential effect these online processes would have on their own participation though. Using this insight as a starting point, the panel surveys were used to validate these assumptions at scale with the wider member base. The assumptions are discussed first, and then compared to actual participation changes.

4.1 ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ONLINE PARTICIPATION EFFECTS

What members assume, at a collective level, is important, because of the grass-roots structure of the Green Party. Members make the decisions, either through votes at (delegate) assemblies, where they decide about tools to be implemented in the future, or through voting with their feet, by either using or not using the tools that are introduced. If they think the tools are useful for all, the results of those tools are also likely to be more legitimate. A higher legitimacy in turn would give the outcomes of these processes more recognition and leverage in future policy development processes, making the tools themselves more influential (Koch et al., 2014). My interviews have shown that both members and leaders of the Green Party are convinced that online tools *can* help engage a wider group of members, particularly those who cannot participate through traditional routes, such as local meetings. The dominating assumption was that OPTs would both increase and diversify the members who engage with policy processes: *“Every member that has access to the internet can participate. That’s definitely more than ever*

before. (...) There are people who do not have the option to attend a meeting (...) That limits the circle of people who could participate. And we do not want that.”

The interview results are closely aligned with the survey respondents. Figure 1 shows a summary of their assumption: OPTs will make participation a lot easier for younger members, while making it slightly harder for older members. The *Antragsgrün* replaced an offline process, but this change happened several years ago; the further development of the tool may have made its use more complex and this indeed made participation harder. The *Begehren* on the other hand does not replace or replicate existing processes, but offers an *additional* route to influence the parties’ decisions. It cannot thus make participation harder per se, but may be less accessible to these ‘older members’ – the only group for which participation is assumed to become harder with online tools. The assumption that older members will struggle to leverage the new tools is unsurprising, as age – in the form of digital natives and immigrants (Prensky, 2001) – is the one demographic category affecting digital divides that has reached mainstream attention. Although this concept in itself is too narrow (White and Le Cornu, 2011), age has been shown to be a relevant factor for internet use time and time again (Emmer et al., 2011; Oser et al., 2013; Vowe, 2014; Ward et al., 2002). Based on the literature, members are right to worry that older members may struggle to use the new online tools.

Respondents further assume that OPTs will make participation easier for members with good and poor networks, though slightly less so for the latter. This is in line with the interviews, where members commented on network size being a positive determinant for online participation. It also fits with the theory of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which suggests that those with richer social connections make their participation both easier and more impactful. There are indications that internet use can help underrepresented groups to form and then leverage

new networks though (Brock et al., 2010). While members with larger networks may benefit more in the short term, others should be able to *build* their networks and increase their reach through the new online tools, and thus catch up with them.

The place of residence is assumed to positively influence participation, although members in densely populated areas are expected to benefit more than in sparsely populated areas. This makes sense from a perspective of internet connectivity, as cities are more likely to have good internet connections than rural areas. While 92% of households in Germany have access to broadband (Eurostat, 2017), connectivity is significantly lower in rural areas (BMVI, 2016, p. 21). On the other hand, given the potential to expand networks online, rural areas could benefit by connecting with members within and across these sparsely populated regions.

There is virtually no difference between participation expectations for men and women: Members assume that participation gets easier for both at the same rate. Women and men make this assumption equally. This is the only category where respondents very distinctly diverge from what the literature would assume to happen. There is a clear gender difference, both in terms of political participation (Niedermayer, 2017),

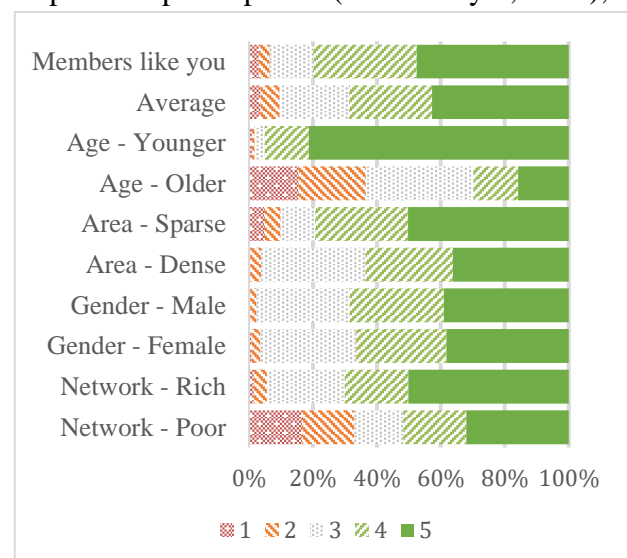


Figure 1. Overview of assumptions about the effect of online participation methods on the participation of selected groups, on a Likert scale from 1 (Participation becomes harder) to 5 (Participation becomes easier). N = 572

and internet use (Emmer et al., 2011). Although women do catch up with men, and may be able to derive larger benefits from web use (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010), this effect is observed over time, rather than immediately from the introduction of online tools (Kerr and Waddington, 2014). While members at scale assume that men and women would be affected by OPTs in the same way, interview participants frequently assumed that women, particularly women with small children, were currently excluded, and thus could benefit more through online tools.

This divergence in views may have several causes. Given the cultural context of the party, these responses are likely based on ideological belief and lived experience. The parties' women's statute (*Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen*, 2015) stipulates that participation has to be gender balanced. This regulation leads to the experience in offline participation that women are on par with men in the party. This may in turn lead members to assume that the same will apply online. However, there is no practical application of the statute to online participation.

Respondents assume that participation becomes easier for everyone, on average: the average rating across all groups is 3.98. Respondents also assume that, on average, participation will be easier for them than for others, with 'members like you' averaging at 4.18. There is a statistically significant linear relationship ($p < 0.000$, and $R^2 = 0.229$) between how online participation is assumed to influence other groups, and the assumed effect on 'members like you': The easier they think it will be for themselves, the easier they think it will be for everyone.

In summary, members think that participation gets easier for everyone apart from 'old people', and that members like themselves will be better off than others. This is contradictory in that surely the respondents are part of some of the groups included in the survey. This reflects the earlier results, where benefits that online processes would bring for the participants were hardly ever mentioned, and all potential benefits reflected onto others (Thuermer et al., 2018).

4.2 ACTUAL PARTICIPATION CHANGES

In order to identify mobilisation and reinforcement effects, I compare indicators for activity in the party, and an increase in participation. As shown in Table 1, there were several distinct features of active party members in 2017: Members engaged in the party wings were more active than those who were not; women were slightly more active than men. Members who expected positive effects for themselves from online participation were less active, and so were members who preferred voting over discussions, members who hold doctorates (as compared to lower university degrees), and who live in cities. This in itself contradicts some of the assumptions of the participation divide: Members who are higher educated, live in cities, or are male, would be expected to be more active (Lijphart, 1997). In that, the Green Party Germany already behaves in a way that does not align with the digital divide.

I now compare these figures, for activity in 2017, and changes to participation by 2018. As shown in Table 2, there is some overlap of indicators, but some new ones arise as well. The picture looks very different for the two online participation methods. The *Antragsgrün* was more likely to increase participation for members who are younger, male, hold no university degree, and already used the tool. The *Begehren* was more likely to increase participation for members who are not online every day, who expect benefits from online tools, and do not hold a university degree.

What stands out is the consistently negative effect of higher education, which contradicts both the participation and digital divide literature (Jensen, 2013; Lijphart, 1997; Vowe, 2014). It seems that the higher a degree a member holds, the less likely they are both to participate, and to increase their participation. Rather than simply mobilising members with lower education, the online tools actually reinforce their already intense participation.

	B
Constant	1.045
Network in party wings (None)	
Left	0.638
Reformer	0.881
Gender (female)	0.129
Expected effect (Likert)	-0.065
Preference of Participation Type (Vote)	-0.113
Education (University Degree)	
PhD	-0.213
Residence (Rural)	
Directly within a city	-0.181

Table 1: Linear Regression Model for Activity in the party in 2017 (N = 359; R² = 0.228). Comparison categories provided in brackets. All significant at p < 0.05.

	Antragsgrün			Begehren		
	N	Odds	CI L-U	N	Odds	CI L-U
Age	294	0.968	0.955 0.982	-		
Daily Internet Use		-		314	0.054	0.016 0.186
Expected effect (Likert)		-		325	1.479	1.115 1.961
Gender (Female)	107	0.342	0.151 0.773	-		
University Degree	214	0.402	0.200 0.808	232	0.514	0.283 0.935
Use of Tool	109	4.845	2.476 9.841	-		

Table 2: Odds Ratios for Increase in Participation through *Antragsgrün* (N = 294; Nagelkerke's R Square = 0.637) and *Begehren* (N = 325; Nagelkerke's R Square = 0.570). All significant at p < 0.05.

Particularly interesting in the context of the Green Party, with their focus on gender equality, is the effect on women: They tend to be more active in the party in general, but are significantly less likely to increase their participation online. It is men who are mobilised through the *Antragsgrün*. Given the central role of the tool in the decision-making process, this may increase their influence beyond the currently higher activity rate of women. While this is not surprising from a literature perspective – women tend to be less interested and less active, both politically and online (Emmer et al., 2011;

Jensen, 2013) – it directly contradicts the assumptions participants made in surveys and interviews: Rather than having the same effect on men and women, or excluded women being empowered, the *Antragsgrün* favours male members. However, this cannot be classed as reinforcement either, as men were slightly less active before. Depending on how this trajectory continues, with men increasing their participation while women do not, this balancing effect may turn into reinforcement over time.

While age was not a significant predictor for activity in 2017, it was significant for an increase in participation through the *Antragsgrün*: The older members were, the less likely they were to increase their participation. Younger members are mobilised, but older members are not. This reflects the digital divide, where youth indicates more online activity (Vowe, 2014).

The positive influence of the expected effects of online tools confirms, to some degree, the hopes with which these tools were introduced. While members who expect the tools to make participation easier for them were less active in 2017, they have significantly increased their participation through the *Begehren*. These do not even seem to be the members who are ‘online anyway’, as daily internet use is a significant negative predictor for this increase: Members who are online every day were less likely to increase their participation through the *Begehren*. That speaks for mobilisation of less active users. However, interviews also indicated that members may not be particularly familiar with the tools, as many participants were not even aware of what the *Begehren* is.

5 CONCLUSION

The comparison between party members’ expectations and actions has shown a clear divergence. In response to the second research question, ‘What are the expected effects of OPTs, and to which degree do they guide decisions about their implementation?’, participants had distinct expectations of who will benefit: OPTs

would make participation easier for everyone, apart from ‘old people’, and enable those who are currently excluded. Members who are younger, well connected, and living in sparsely populated areas, were assumed to benefit the most. To some degree, this reflects members who are not currently active, as older members and cities-dwellers are more likely to be active. Overall though, respondents assumed that, on average, participation would become easier for members like themselves than for others.

If these assumptions were true, it would be logical to expect the introduction of OPTs to lead to a mobilisation effect. It would be easier for members who are currently excluded to participate, therefore online tools could help to increase their participation, and enable them to catch up with their highly active peers.

But these are only assumptions about potential, and the picture for actual use looks rather different: those who did increase their participation are either on the positive side of the digital divide, or in favour of the tools. This provides a clear answer to the first research question: ‘What are the actual effects, and how do they differ between groups and tools?’

The effects do differ between groups, and from expectations, particularly concerning gender: While respondents assumed the same effects for men and women, women were significantly less likely to increase their participation. Some of this effect is balanced by the fact that women are slightly more active overall; however, the increase in participation by men through the *Antragsgrün* far outweighs the current advantage of the women. By selectively mobilising men, the use of the online tool could open a rift that does currently not exist in the participation practice of the party. This is exacerbated – or caused – by the lack of control mechanisms for gender equality online. Without these, the party appears to be hit by both the participation divide, with women being generally less likely to engage in politics (which is balanced through the *Frauenstatut* in their offline processes), and the digital

divide, where women are less likely to engage politically online.

All in all, the results indicate a mobilisation effect for men, members who are younger, and have lower educational attainment. The best predictor of increased participation through both tools is a high opinion of the OPTs, and a positive outlook on online participation. If members like the tools, and believe that they will help them, they are more likely to increase their participation, which is underlined particularly by the lack of awareness of the *Begehren*. This is a result the party, or any organisation, could build on, for example by offering information and training, or a staged on-boarding process, as increasing knowledge is likely to translate directly into increased approval and adoption.

At last, it is worth to step back and consider that the effects of both tools analysed in this paper were very different. While the *Antragsgrün* engages members of young age, and male gender, low internet use and high enthusiasm for online tools were more relevant for increased activity through the *Begehren*. Education was the only category that affected the activity of participants in general, and for both tools – but in all cases, the effect was the opposite of the digital divide, with higher education indicating less, rather than more participation.

In summary, these results give an important indication for future research: We need to look at the effects of online participation not only through the lens of the digital divide, considering access, skill and use, but also include the role and functionality of the tools, their institutional context, and the appeal to intended users.

6 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the support of Green Party Germany; my participants for their time and commitment to respond to interviews and surveys; and the EPSRC, for the funding that made this research possible (Grant # EP/L016117/1).

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